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Wednesday, 19 March 2003, 3.30 p.m.

New York

President:	Mr. Traoré	(Guinea)
Members:	Angola	Mr. Helder Lucas
	Bulgaria	Mr. Tafrov
	Cameroon	Mr. Tidjani
	Chile	Mr. Maquieira
	China	Mr. Zhang Yishan
	France	Mr. Duclos
	Germany	Mr. Pleuger
	Mexico	Mrs. Arce de Jeannet
	Pakistan	Mr. Akram
	Russian Federation	Mr. Gatilov
	Spain	Ms. Menendez
	Syrian Arab Republic	Mr. Mekdad
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Mr. Thomson
	United States of America	Mr. Negroponte

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question.

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03-28610 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 3.40 p.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President (*spoke in French*): In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, and in the absence of objection, I shall take it that the Security Council agrees to extend an invitation under rule 39 of its provisional rules of procedure to Mr. Terje Roed-Larsen, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General.

There being no objection, it is so decided.

I invite Mr. Roed-Larsen to take a seat at the Council table.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda. The Council is meeting in accordance with the understanding reached in its prior consultations.

At this meeting, the Security Council will hear a briefing by Mr. Terje Roed-Larsen, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General.

I now give him the floor.

Mr. Roed-Larsen: Recognizing the urgency of the Security Council's concerns with regard to Iraq, I am grateful for the opportunity to brief the Council on the situation in a different part of the Middle East. This month marks two and-a-half years of crisis in Israel and in the West Bank and Gaza Strip — two and-a-half years of mourning and insecurity, of political stalemate and economic ruin. Although this crisis is not new, the need to resolve it is as critical as ever, for it is also unpredictable and has the potential to destabilize the Middle East.

At the same time, a door of new opportunity has opened. With the front lines of war rapidly appearing before us, it provides us with the possibility of a front line for peace. But to reinforce that front line requires visible and vigorous actions.

For the first time in two and-a-half years, I believe we have a real opportunity not only to begin rebuilding the shattered Israeli and Palestinian relationship, but also to finally start implementing a process that can lead to the realization of our shared vision and goals for peace and security in the region. But first, we need to get the parties back to the table. And that requires three critical decisions, taken in parallel by the key actors in this process. I am heartened to say that some of those decisions are, in fact, already on their way to being realized.

First, the Palestinian Authority must make fundamental decisions on reform in order to re-establish itself as a credible partner for Israel and the international community. Notably, the completion yesterday of the appointment of a credible and empowered Prime Minister was a major step. Now we must see immediate efforts on the part of the new Palestinian Government to do everything within its power to curb terrorism and all forms of violence and threats.

Secondly, the international community, through the Quartet — that is, Russia, the United States, the European Union and the United Nations — must introduce the road map, as agreed in its final draft in Washington, D.C., on 20 December. That should be an agreed starting point. The parties will be asked to make contributions on how best to proceed with its implementation.

Thirdly, the Government of Israel must sit down at the negotiating table on this basis. The Government of Israel must also take immediate and serious steps to prevent harm to innocent Palestinian civilians and to alleviate the widespread suffering caused by its security measures.

In order to move forward, however, we must have no illusions about where we stand.

Since our last briefing to the Council, 162 people have lost their lives to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict: 135 Palestinians and 27 Israelis. That raises the total death toll since September 2000 to 2,502 Palestinians and 724 Israelis.

The Palestinian Authority must do everything in its power to prevent the killing of innocents. On 3 March, the murderous suicide bombing of a bus in the Carmeliya neighbourhood of Haifa killed 17 people, in addition to the bomber, and injured more than 30, half of them seriously. As we have stated many times in the past, such mass murder — such outrageous waste of

life — cannot be justified on any grounds or by any cause. I call on the Palestinian Authority to bring to justice those involved in planning such attacks, and I call on the groups responsible to end their use of terror once and for all.

If not, what is left of the Palestinian Authority security forces will have to confront those who murder civilians in acts that cannot be seen as political or justified by any means. Although the Palestinian Authority's circumstances are extremely difficult, it is the legitimate authority within agreed Palestinian Authority areas. Unless it exercises — with all means available — its monopoly on the use of force in those limited areas, it will have failed in its authority and leadership.

During the past month, Israeli military forces conducted intensive operations in a number of Palestinian cities and refugee camps throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Those operations caused intolerably high numbers of civilian casualties — particularly in the Gaza Strip, where the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) conducted its largest incursions since the beginning of the crisis.

There are disturbing reports that the force used by Israel was excessive and at times indiscriminate. On a number of occasions, the Israeli military used powerful explosives to demolish the family homes of persons accused of attacks against Israeli targets, often causing substantial damage to adjacent buildings. In one such operation in a refugee camp in Gaza, a woman who was almost nine months pregnant died when her house collapsed on her, and medical personnel were prevented from reaching her. Just this week, the American peace activist Rachel Corrie died after an IDF bulldozer ran her over. Perhaps the saddest and most telling statistic of the trauma being inflicted on Gaza: at least 22 children younger than 18 have been killed there in the past two months alone.

As all four members of the Quartet have stressed — and stressed repeatedly — over the course of this crisis, Israel has an absolute obligation under international law to minimize harm to innocent civilians. I call once again on the Government of Israel to take more proactive steps to ensure that its military forces abide scrupulously by those principles, to re-examine their rules of engagement and to conduct a robust investigation of each and every civilian death caused by Israeli military activity. Like every other State, Israel has a right to self-defence. But that right must be exercised with caution, using reasonable means.

The ongoing physical insecurity so acutely felt by Palestinians and Israelis alike is also creating serious economic insecurity. A massive infusion of foreign assistance has helped to prevent a total collapse of the Palestinian economy. Stark evidence of this crisis was presented last month in London to the primary forum for donors to the Palestinians, the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee.

The World Bank and my office, the Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator in the Occupied Territories (UNSCO), presented our latest detailed assessment of Palestinian economic life. The findings are alarming. In just 27 months, closure and other movement restrictions reduced Palestinian gross national income by approximately $5.4 billion — the entire year's worth of income. Poverty, defined as less than $2 consumption per day, has increased from 21 per cent on the eve of the crisis, to 60 per cent today — and 75 per cent in the Gaza Strip. In addition, real per capita food consumption has dropped by up to 30 per cent since September 2000.

The Palestinian private sector has been hit particularly hard in the last two years. Well over 50 per cent of the private workforce has been laid off; and, according to UNSCO figures, unemployment now stands at 45 per cent. Bank credit to the private sector is drying up, and the Palestinian Authority currently owes private suppliers approximately $370 million in unpaid bills.

Many Palestinians have turned to the agricultural sector as a coping mechanism. However, construction by Israel of the separation wall in the West Bank, coupled with severe movement restrictions, have denied many communities access to their land and sources of livelihood. This has the potential of creating communities wholly dependent on aid. The town of Qalqilya is a case in point, where some 32,000 Palestinians are virtually surrounded by the separation wall, and access to and from town is limited to an eight-metre gate supervised by Israeli soldiers. In such circumstances, it is difficult to see how the minimum social, economic and humanitarian needs of the local population can be met.

The aggregate social costs of these conditions are staggering — and very difficult to reverse. Palestinians

in the West Bank and Gaza Strip face near-total insecurity; they lack any avenue for improving their circumstances or addressing violations of their basic rights. In view of the prevailing circumstances, many adolescents see no reason to continue their education; school drop-out rates have risen markedly. In addition, teachers are reporting an increase in violent behaviour at school. And as the crisis persists, social and human rights organizations have noted growing violence against women.

I would like to emphasize that international aid alone cannot respond adequately to these problems. Its continuation is critical to avoid total collapse. But even if annual donor aid were to double from its current $1 billion, which is now poured in on an annual basis, it would have only a marginal effect on alleviating poverty rates.

At last month's Ad Hoc Liaison Committee meeting of all major donors, the multilateral institutions and the parties, donors expressed their conviction that support to the Palestinian Authority remains the best short-term vehicle for addressing the dire economic and humanitarian situation. They also stressed that Israel must do more to reduce the burden of security restrictions on innocent civilians and facilitate the provision of international assistance to communities in need. In this regard, I note with concern that the World Food Programme (WFP) and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) have had to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars in storage and other costs due to security clearance delays at Israeli ports and border crossings, some of which have lasted as long as 40 days.

More broadly, donors stressed the urgent need to re-establish a tripartite effort involving Palestinians, Israelis and the international community, working in partnership to address these problems, along with the security and political issues that have spawned them. I suggested at the London meetings that donors regularize weekly meetings with the parties at ministerial level as soon as a Palestinian Prime Minister and his cabinet are formed.

The point to come out of this is that, if the current Israeli security regime remains, the Palestinian humanitarian situation will continue to deteriorate at alarming speed. And this brings us to the only way out of this crisis — namely, a negotiated political solution.

Sir, let me turn to the three key decisions that the key actors must take. I believe that the Palestinian Authority's progress in implementing reforms, particularly the establishment of a credible and empowered office of the Prime Minister, provides an opportunity to begin rebuilding a peaceful partnership of negotiations.

Yesterday, after a near-unanimous decision by the Palestinian Legislative Council, President Arafat approved a bill of amendments to the Palestinian Authority Basic Law that creates the post of Prime Minister and defines his powers.

The amendments to the Basic Law give the Prime Minister a number of powers currently held by the Palestinian Authority President, including appointing or removing cabinet ministers and other senior officials; convening and presiding over cabinet meetings; and supervising the work of Palestinian Authority ministries and other institutions, including the Ministry of Interior, which is responsible for public order and internal security.

With the political blessing of the Palestine Liberation Organization's Central Council, he nominated Mahmoud Abbas — Abu Mazen — to the post of Prime Minister. Abu Mazen, a credible and well-respected leader, now has up to five weeks to present a new government to the Palestinian Legislative Council for approval. Hopefully his Government will be in place long before that.

I believe that President Arafat, the Palestinian leadership and the Palestinian Legislative Council deserve to be commended for this courageous and visionary step, and for the other reforms they have undertaken, with full transparency and in close cooperation and coordination with the international community and the Quartet, which has kept in particularly close contact with the Governments of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan during this process.

Other key areas of reform were discussed in London on 19 and 20 February at the Quartet's Task Force on Palestinian Reform, which met at the capital level, with the participation of the Quartet envoys. Its overall assessment was that the Palestinian Authority has made impressive progress in implementing reforms under exceptionally difficult circumstances. Although the Task Force remained very critical of the lack of progress in the judicial sector, there was general consensus that financial accountability and market

economy reforms continue to progress at a rapid pace. Task Force members also commended the Palestinian Authority for adopting a detailed and ambitious action plan for public administration and civil service reform.

The Task Force noted that the reform process was seriously hampered by Israeli mobility restrictions in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which both stymied its progress and undermined its credibility. Task Force members urged the Government of Israel to help facilitate the reform process, while also reiterating that it must minimize the impact of its security measures on the civilian population.

The Palestinian Authority has started taking important decisions to restart negotiations. Now it is the turn of both Israel and the international community. Quite simply, Israel and the Palestinian Authority must return to the table in a negotiating framework with the Quartet road map as its starting point. Israel must also look at ways to ease the massive burden on the Palestinian civilian population in the West Bank and Gaza.

As members of the Council are aware, Prime Minister Sharon's Government was sworn in on 27 February. The Prime Minister's new coalition brings together the Likud, Shinui, National Union and National Religious parties.

No one underestimates the challenges facing Israel at this juncture in its history. Terrorism is still murdering innocent men, women and children in Israel's streets. Against the backdrop of violence and instability, the Israeli economy is in distress, with rising unemployment and increasing social problems, particularly for the poor.

I commend the Prime Minister for standing by his stated commitment to the vision of two States, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security, as outlined in President Bush's statement of 24 June 2002. It is towards achieving that vision that we now must turn. Recent conversations I have had with senior Israeli interlocutors clearly show that there is now a will to go back to the table.

With war in Iraq even more likely — perhaps almost here — it is imperative that the members of this Council demonstrate to the peoples of the region and of the world that their ultimate goal in the Middle East is peace. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict we must not be blind to or underestimate the challenges that lie ahead, particularly on the security front. But a door has opened, and we must now walk through it.

I believe that President Bush's announcement last Friday that the Quartet will present the road map to the parties as soon as a credible and empowered Prime Minister is confirmed is an important step on which we must build. The development of the road map has been a lengthy and meticulous process. It began with the Quartet Principals' meeting in New York last September at the Secretary-General's initiative and in his office.

In that meeting, we decided that we should, in operational terms, spell out reciprocal steps to be taken by the parties in each of its phases. A key guiding principle was the Secretary-General's conceptual distinction between parallelism and sequentialism. No longer could we move through a process based on sequentialism. We had to pursue progress across the board and in parallel on all issues — security, economic and political. Critically, as we have seen so many times, no ceasefire can take hold if political progress and economic suffering are not simultaneously addressed.

Under the road map and under the auspices of the Quartet, progress would be monitored and assessed on the basis of the parties' compliance with specific performance benchmarks. For more than a year, the Quartet has engaged in extensive consultations on developing the road map. Most of this has been internal, but the Quartet has also engaged the Government of Israel, the Palestinian Authority, other Governments in the region and key international players. I believe that the text that ultimately emerged from the Quartet's meetings in December 2002 in Washington, D.C., represents a finely tuned balance between the interests and capacities of all concerned parties.

A number of features of the road map are essential to its successful implementation. As the Secretary-General has repeatedly observed, every attempt to implement a sequential approach over the past two years has failed. So, first and foremost, the road map sets out reciprocal obligations for Israelis and Palestinians that they must implement in parallel.

The road map requires immediate action by both sides. The Palestinian Authority must not only declare an unequivocal end to violence and terrorism, but also undertake visible efforts on the ground to prevent

violent attacks on Israelis anywhere. At the same time, the Government of Israel must end actions that undermine trust, such as proactive security operations, attacks on civilians, confiscation and demolition of Palestinian homes and property, and other measures specified in the Tenet plan. Israel must also immediately dismantle settlement outposts erected since March 2001 and, consistent with the Mitchell report, freeze all settlement activity, including natural growth.

A second new and critical feature of the road map is that it clearly defines our final destination. In accordance with Security Council resolution 1397 (2002), the final negotiated settlement will result in the emergence of an independent, democratic and viable Palestinian State living side by side in peace and security with Israel and its other neighbours. The settlement will resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and end the occupation that began in 1967 — a vital element of international efforts to promote comprehensive peace in the Middle East. In addition, because only a comprehensive peace can bring stability, security and prosperity to the region, the other tracks of the Middle East peace process will be revived. This will also been done in parallel, based on Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973).

Despite the continued distrust between the two sides, I am confident that there is now mutual recognition of the many imperatives that compel them to embrace a peace process once again. I strongly believe that it is in their mutual self-interest never to lose sight of the need to forge a common vision of their future. The road map defines that vision and the steps needed to achieve it.

To be sure, many details still need to be worked out. We welcome the parties' ideas about how best to implement their obligations and how the Quartet and others can assist them. But first we must begin. And the only way to begin, as President Bush and Prime Minister Blair emphasized last Friday, is for the parties to move beyond entrenched positions and to take concrete actions to achieve peace.

Despite a number of concerns, the Palestinians have accepted the road map without reservations. I trust that, faced with this extraordinary opportunity to put an end to the misery and insecurity of the past two years, the Government of Israel will shortly do the same. This would allow the parties to move forward in a dialogue that would produce consensus on how to implement the Quartet's road map. The Quartet stands ready to support such a development with all necessary measures.

Let me move now to developments on the Israeli-Lebanese front. Since our last briefing to the Security Council, the situation along the Blue Line has remained tense but stable. However, I note with concern recent Israeli air violations and Hizbullah anti-aircraft fire directed across the Blue Line. The Government of Lebanon continued to strengthen its presence in the south, with increased patrolling by the Lebanese armed forces and the joint security forces in southern Lebanon and in areas close to the Blue Line. I choose to interpret this as a reflection of a commitment of the Government of Lebanon to ensuring a calm environment in the south.

Given the high level of tension in the region, any provocative action along or across the Blue Line at this time, such as air violations and anti-aircraft fire, could rapidly deteriorate into a destabilizing dynamic. I call on all parties concerned to maintain maximum restraint and avoid any action that could be interpreted by other parties as hostile. This is of particular concern and importance at a time when the region might go into a period of further instability and unpredictability.

The situation on the Golan Heights has remained calm since our last briefing. The importance of continued respect for the terms and spirit of the Disengagement Agreement cannot be overstated. Both Israel and Syria have proven, over more than two decades, their ability and their desire to respect their mutual commitments. Although the Disengagement Agreement is limited in scope, full respect for its terms stands as proof that agreements can be, and indeed are, respected in the Middle East. This lesson should contribute to building trust between the two parties when, in accordance with the road map, they resume negotiations to implement resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973) and to build a comprehensive peace in the region.

I hope the Council will forgive me for taking so much of its time, while other issues loom so large on its agenda. It is the nature of politics — particularly, I fear, in the Middle East — that fires break out all at once. As we move towards war in one part of the

region, I trust we will not miss this opportunity to move towards peace in another.

In closing, I reiterate that for the first time in two and-a-half years, I see a small window of opportunity to get back to the table, and out of the abyss of terrorism, violence, economic misery and general human suffering. To seize that opportunity, three critical steps are nearing completion.

The Palestinian step has been to appoint a credible and empowered Prime Minister, which once again can make the Palestinian Authority a partner for peace at the negotiating table. The international step has been buoyed by the decision of the United States to join the three other Quartet partners in agreeing to present the road map to the parties and to call for its implementation. The third and equally important step is the Government of Israel's return to the negotiating table. It has already reaffirmed its commitment to the two-State solution, which is embedded in the road map, and has expressed willingness to go back to the table to seek a peaceful solution based on those goals.

Without a political, negotiated settlement based on the road map and the two-State solution there will be neither security nor stability in the Middle East. We have a historic opportunity to establish a vigorous and determined front of peace when elsewhere in the region we are at the brink of war. That front of peace can be a source of long-term stability in the region. However, that requires dedicated attention and action from all of us. Without that, I fear, this opportunity will be lost.

The President (*spoke in French*): I thank Mr. Roed-Larsen for his very detailed, informative and interesting briefing.

The meeting rose at 4.15 p.m.